

Boot Camps: Mixed Results

By Doris T. Wells

Author's Note: *Points of view expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Correctional Boot Camps: *Lessons From a Decade of Research*, a National Institute of Justice 10-year study of boot camp data, found that boot camps as an alternative form of incarceration successfully improved inmates' negative attitudes and behavior. However, these changes, with few exceptions, did not reduce recidivism, prison costs and prison populations. Although now less prevalent, boot camps still persist. This is perhaps because camp administrators now have more realistic expectations; some camps, as recommended, have added treatment services and modified their extreme discipline tactics; and many camps are providing increased order and safety in correctional facilities.

What Are Boot Camps?

Since their inception in 1983 in Georgia and Oklahoma, boot camps have been used as an alternative sanction to reduce prison populations, recidivism and rising prison operating costs. In their original form, correctional boot camps are in-prison programs that imitate the structure and military-style discipline of basic training. They emphasize vigorous physical activity, drill exercises and ceremony, manual labor and other activities that drastically reduce a participant's free time. Like military drill instructors, correctional officers use intense verbal tactics designed to shock and break an individual's resistance to change. According to the NIJ study, lessons learned from prior research caused some subsequent camps to de-emphasize the military elements and add more promising components such as treatment services and post-release supervision.

Do Boot Camps Work?

Boot camps were expected to reduce negative behavior, recidivism and rising prison costs by reducing prison populations. NIJ's research evaluation revealed that boot camps achieved a mixed rate of success in meeting these goals.

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Improving Behavior. Boot camps were highly successful in improving inmates' attitudes and behavior during the course of the program. They also produced safer environments for staff and residents, possibly resulting from their highly structured atmosphere and disciplined activities. NIJ's 10-year evaluation found that adult boot camp participants demonstrated more pro-social attitudes and more positive attitudes about their confinement experiences than participants in a comparison group. In one study, inmates in adult boot camps reported increased self-esteem, reduced antisocial attitudes, increased problem-solving and coping skills, and improved social support. Other studies showed that boot camp inmates improved their self-esteem and standardized reading and math scores more than inmates in a comparison group.

Reducing Recidivism. The compiled data consistently showed that most boot camps did not reduce recidivism regardless of the inmate's age (adult or juvenile) or the boot camp's style (early military type or later treatment type). However, the research did indicate that some camps that added more treatment services, longer programs and intensive post-release supervision did have some success in reducing recidivism.

Reducing Prison Populations/Prison Costs. The 10-year data revealed that correctional boot camps might produce small relative but not significant overall reductions in prison populations. For example, adult boot camp programs in Illinois, Louisiana and New York reduced their need for prison beds, and South Dakota and Oregon juvenile boot camps reduced the needed number of correctional beds. In such situations, reducing the number of prison beds needed could lead to modest reductions in correctional costs. Likewise, boot camps could reduce prison costs for offenders who would otherwise serve longer and costlier sentences.

Low Returns

The data suggest that boot camps failed to reduce recidivism and prison populations for several reasons.

Insufficient Time to Prepare Participants for Re-Entry. The time spent in many boot camps is often too short to adequately teach offenders the life skills (e.g., money management, workplace ethics, job hunting skills and anger management) they need to cope with re-entering the community.

Conflicting Policies or Unrealistic Goals. Some prisons instituted early release policies that gave inmates the opportunity to serve shorter sentences — the major attraction of boot camps — without having to endure the rigors of boot camps. As a result, fewer offenders volunteered for boot camps.

Lack of a Standard Treatment

Model. Researchers found it difficult to evaluate and measure the success of many individual components of the boot camps because the structure and treatment methods of many camps were affected by local politics and pragmatism and, therefore, were not solidly founded on theory and lessons learned.

Future Outlook

Trying to achieve multiple and, at times, conflicting goals may be the major reason boot camps failed to reduce recidivism and prison populations. Moreover, not all elements of boot camps are cost-effective for and relevant to all correctional facilities. Correctional administrators and program designers should determine, based on costs and needs, which options are best for which types of inmates in their jurisdictions. For example, some jurisdictions may prefer to implement longer treatment programs, while others may need to set up early-release programs that quickly move certain types of inmates out of the system.

In addition, some correctional facilities find that the highly structured regimen and reduced idleness aspects of boot camps create a safer and more secure environment for younger offenders. However, other jurisdictions faced with rising costs are cutting boot camp programs. But according to Dale Parent, who conducted the NIJ research, "One lesson for policy-makers from 10 years of boot camp research is that curtailing [such] programs may lead to increased violence, misconduct, and serious management problems." This suggests that although boot camps did not achieve most of their original goals, some of their elements, such as structure and discipline, are being used to address other problems in correctional facilities. Forced to handle large prison populations, correctional administrators welcome lessons learned from boot camps that may help officers reduce violence, misconduct and serious management problems that contribute to officer stress — another continuing problem in correctional facilities.¹

According to Mike Slusher of the Koch Crime Institute, running boot camps is a lot "like parenting ... some

are successful, some aren't. It's a lot about what you put into it." If a parent is a good role model and there for the child, the child has a chance to succeed. "Likewise, with [a boot camp] if the funding's adequate, if the training goes with it, it's got a shot."²

NIJ continues to support research on topics, such as boot camps, that address the needs of correctional institutions. Additional resources and publications about boot camps can be downloaded from NIJ's Web site at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij.

ENDNOTES

¹ Finn, P. 2000. *Addressing correctional officer stress: Programs and strategies*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. (Most of the information in this article is based on the findings of this publication.)

² Rogers, D. 2002. Juvenile boot camps: Law enforcement is finding that there aren't any answers. *Law Enforcement Technology*, 29(6):88-95.

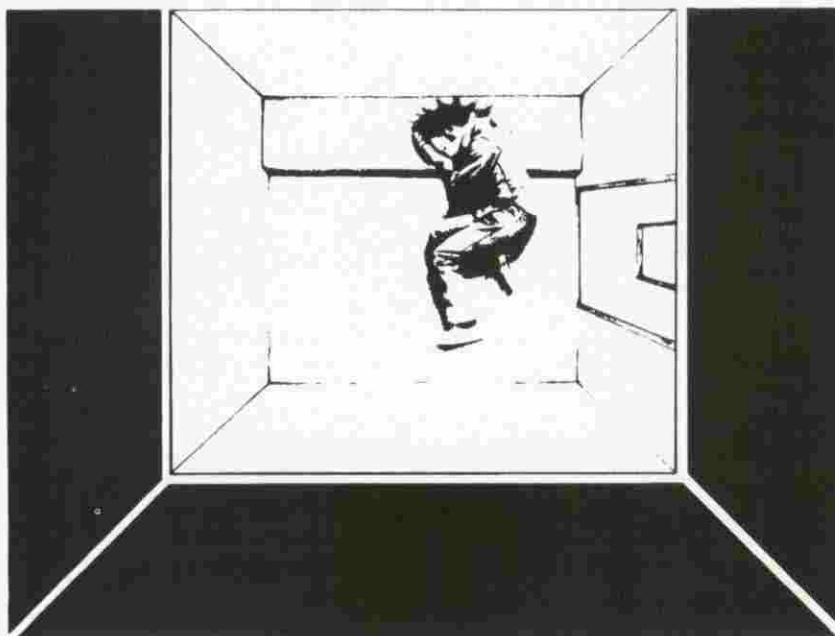
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